Blurred boundaries: The intersections of language teaching and linguistic inquiry

Studies of language increasingly cross disciplinary boundaries. Theoretical linguists now use experimental and instrumental approaches in their approaches to questions about language, psycholinguists and applied linguists carefully describe linguistic variation and connections with social variables, and language teachers combine theories of learning and studies of language to improve teaching and learning.

Language teaching and learning is often an entry into linguistic inquiry, and the two areas have long overlapped. Pike’s (1945) description of American English intonation, for example, had dual purposes: providing a linguistically rigorous description of the structure of intonation and teaching intonation to foreign learners. A deep disciplinary divide between language teaching and linguistics developed with the Chomskyan revolution in the 1960s, in which the study of linguistics had little to do with language teaching, and journals focusing on specific issues relevant to language teaching grew up to provide outlets for research on second-language learning and acquisition.

The divide between linguistics and language teaching has always been uncomfortable. Linguists and language teachers traffic in many of the same topics, such as language acquisition, language structure, and language intuitions and use. The divide has also become less tenable with increasing attention to the systems of bilinguals and L2 learners and the processes by which they construct the L2. The divide also means that varied research findings are rarely known across disciplinary boundaries, to the detriment of all.

This talk looks at an area in which linguistic inquiry crosses the disciplinary boundaries of language teaching and linguistics: English lexical and phrasal stress. I will look at how language teaching concerns about lexical stress, phrase rhythm, and nuclear stress inform questions in linguistics, show how findings from linguistic research can make for better pedagogy, and ultimately argue that the findings of language-related disciplines should, and must, inform each other.